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BUFFALO CLERGY UNITE
TO RELIEVE TENSIONS

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BUFFALO, N. Y. -- Black and white clergy of all faiths have rallied to restore calm in the wake of the murders of six black men in the metropolitan Buffalo area.

The Rt. Rev. Harold B. Robinson, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York, took a leading role in calling the clergy together to offer support to the black community and to attempt to ease the racial tensions which have flared since the murders began in late September.

While the killer suspect eludes police, the religious community has responded by urging the entire metropolitan community to remain calm, support the police investigation and show sympathy for the victims' families.

Four black men from various parts of the city were shot to death in a 36-hour period in late September. Each was shot several times in the head at close range by a killer or killers with the same handgun -- a .22 caliber pistol -- police say. The weapon has not been found.

On Oct. 7 and 8, two more brutal slayings were discovered. Two black taxicab drivers had been beaten or stabbed to death and their hearts cut out.

On Oct. 10, an attempted strangulation of a black patient in the Erie County Medical Center was thwarted by a nurse. The suspect -- whom police believe may be the same man involved in the .22 caliber slayings -- fled. The patient remains in serious condition with neck wounds.

Fear and tension gripped the city in the wake of the multiple murders, since the slayings and attempted strangulation appeared to be racially motivated.

Several racial incidents also were reported -- including three cross burnings in Erie and Niagara counties.

Returning from the House of Bishops interim meeting in Chattanooga, Tenn., Bishop Robinson assessed the emotionally charged situation and called for a show of solidarity among the clergy.

On Oct. 16, the religious leaders of the metropolitan community held a press conference announcing their support of the black community and asking for a reconciliation between the black and white communities. The press conference, held in Shiloh Baptist Church in the heart of the black community, was spearheaded by the Council of Churches in Erie and Niagara Counties, the Episcopal Diocese, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo, other major protestant denominations, and the House of Rabbis.

At that gathering, Bishop Robinson read a statement, signed by all of the religious leaders of the community, which said in part:

"As members and leaders in the Buffalo area religious communities, we would speak to our neighbors who share our hurt and desire to reconcile. There have been six senseless murders affecting all of us and provoking wide-spread reaction in our black community when they first felt silence and unconcern from the wider community.

"We share a grave concern with all the members of the community for their personal safety. . . .

"We accept our responsibility to build community respect, mutuality and unity. The religious community -- black and white -- is not going to stand by complacently tolerating violence and racism.

"Our hearts and prayers go out to all who mourn the loss of loved ones. We share their sorrow. We respect and admire the black community which has borne this tragedy with calm and dignity. We seek to be a caring community and we call for actions and supportive relationships that make our caring known.

"While we identify the murderers as sick and deranged persons, nevertheless we must speak to the issue of racism. Racism is a condition in our society as a whole and in our community which provides fertile soil for sick persons to act out their violent and inhuman impulses.

"Racism takes many forms -- it is both open and insidious, personal and institutional. It shows its ugly head whenever we set group against group or put down persons unlike ourselves. It exists in more subtle forms in the denial of opportunity to any person or group. We call upon every person, whatever their religious faith or ethnic group, to recognize, struggle with and overcome racism among us -- so that we may build the structures of a truly caring community."

The clergy called upon the wider community to join in showing support of the black community by wearing official black armbands of mourning and observing the 21-day mourning period called for by government leaders. They also called for participation in a Day of Unity held Sunday, October 19 in front of City Hall in downtown Buffalo.

Closing their statement, the clergy said:

"Let this be only a beginning of true sharing among white and black and Hispanic and other members of our community. Let religious leaders meet regularly from this time on, in prayer and concern for one another and for our community.

"Let people of every white congregation pray and study and act together with the people of our black and Hispanic churches. Let us together learn the meaning of living with one another in community. Let us build a caring community with safe streets and homes, equal opportunity for all, mutual respect and support."

"We all hurt deeply, but if we are together God shall heal."

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